


# On the border between religion and superstition: Schleiermacher on religion



## Author:

Jaco Beyers<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Jaco Beyers,  
jaco.beyers@up.ac.za

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The ideas of Friedrich Schleiermacher contributes hugely to the understanding of the concept of religion. Many scholars have published on the significance of Schleiermacher for theology, philosophy and hermeneutics. In response to the Enlightenment thought, Schleiermacher constructed a reappraisal of what religion is. His emphasis on intuition and feeling, steered away from the rational interpretation of religion which placed human cognition at the centre of religion. For Schleiermacher religion should indicate a self-transcendence and a feeling of dependence. In the current era of technocracy, human knowledge and experience is reduced to that which is accessible via technology. Whether technology becomes the medium or object of veneration, surely vary from context to context. Schleiermacher provides direction under the current paradigm, to search for meaning where the human spirit connects with a meaningful other. In order to address this endeavour, this research makes use of a literature study. The goal of this article is to identify the border between superstition and religion by attempting to illuminate the boundaries of religion. It is, according to David Chidester, precisely at the boundaries where religion is best understood.

**Contribution:** The article highlights the importance of the theories created by Schleiermacher and how it applies within a current context where a distinction between religion and superstition is necessary. The research addresses the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, numbers 10 (reducing inequalities), 11 (sustainable communities) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

**Keywords:** religion; religion studies; Schleiermacher; knowledge; transcendence; technology; feeling; intuition; dependence.

## Introduction

Friedrich Schleiermacher is one of the important theorists of religion. The perspective on Schleiermacher's contribution presented here forms part of a larger project discussing contributions made by various scholars to the field of Religion Studies.

Schleiermacher's ideas influenced the way in which religion is perceived today. Mariña (ed. 2005:1) is of the opinion that Schleiermacher contributed to the thinking on religion with his publication *Über Religion* as 'a foundational text in the theory of religion'.

The life of Schleiermacher has extensively been depicted in the biographical work by Nowak (2001). Because Schleiermacher contributed so much to various sciences, this study will focus on his work on the theory of religion. Tice (2005:307) identified Schleiermacher's contribution to philosophy, ethics, history and theology, whilst Mariña (ed. 2005:1–2) added to this his work on hermeneutics and philology. Van Aarde (2019:2) emphasised Schleiermacher's contribution to hermeneutics. Crouter (2005a:2) added this to Schleiermacher's contribution to politics and education.

The reception of Schleiermacher oscillates from outright negative critique to positive appreciation. The work by Niebuhr (1964) introduced an important critical evaluation of Schleiermacher's work. Tice (2005:311) published several bibliographies of research done on Schleiermacher's work. The attention afforded by the American Academy of Religion to Schleiermacher resulted in a permanent study group as well as a publication by Duke and Streetman (eds. 1998) evaluating Karl Barth's criticism of Schleiermacher (Tice 2005:312). Since 1986, Tice (2005:312) indicated that

**Note:** Special Collection: Re-readings of Major Theorists of Religion: Continuities and Discontinuities, sub-edited by Mohammed (Auwais) Rafudeen (University of South Africa).

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more studies on Schleiermacher resulted in more publications and conferences organised by the International Schleiermacher Society. Tice (2005:313) opined that there is 'a reasonable expectation of further influence by Schleiermacher, thus a continuing growth of Schleiermacher-related scholarship' which does not only include studies on Schleiermacher but also include translations of his work (Tice 2005:316). It is clear that the ideas of Schleiermacher will still continue to influence thoughts on religion today.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this article is as much as describing as well as evaluating the contribution Schleiermacher made to the understanding of religion. Schleiermacher is almost a liminal figure: moving between the borders of theology and science, between Enlightenment and Romanticism. This research aims to determine whether Schleiermacher can contribute to an understanding of religion in a technocratic society.

## Schleiermacher in context

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born in 1768 to a Prussian army chaplain in Breslau (ed. Mariña 2005:2). His earliest education was by the Moravian Brethren (Hernhuters), a pietist community following the reformed principles set out by P.J. Spener in his *Pia Desideria* (1675). He had first attended school at Niesky (1783) and later moved to Barby (1785) near Magdeburg. He was from an early age on exposed to the writings of Kant and Goethe. In 1787, he went to the University of Halle where he studied theology, philosophy and philology. Mariña (ed. 2005:2) provided a brief timeline of his life:

- 1790: completion of his academic theological examinations in Berlin
- 1790–1793: private tutor to the Dohna family in Prussia
- 1794–1796: pastor in Landsberg
- 1796: hospital chaplain in Berlin where he was influenced by the German Romanticism as represented by Karl von Schlegel
- 1802–1804: pastor in Stolp
- 1804: teaching position at the University of Halle
- 1806–1807: resided in Berlin
- 1809: married Henriette von Willich
- 1808–1811: co-founder with Wilhelm von Humboldt of the University of Berlin
- 1810–1834: teaching position in theology at the University of Berlin, acting as the dean of the faculty of theology, whilst still acting as a congregation pastor
- 1829: his only son, Nathaniel, dies
- 1834: dies of pneumonia in Berlin.

## Context and concerns of Schleiermacher's time

During his lifetime, Schleiermacher experienced radical changes in different areas ranging from intellectual, financial, political, ideological, geographical and religious developments in Europe. To understand Schleiermacher's

concept of religion, one needs to understand him within his own time. Crouter (2005b:2) indicates that Schleiermacher cannot be understood apart from his cultural setting. Some scholars try and interpret Schleiermacher as if his teaching is timeless and without context and can be applied to any and every context. His ideas should be understood in light of his surroundings. That, however, does not mean that his legacy has no relevance for today. Insights gained from 'musings' over Schleiermacher, as Crouter (2005b:248) referred to it, may contribute to understanding the concept of religion today. The relevance of Schleiermacher for studies today will be discussed in the last section of this contribution.

As to Schleiermacher's context, politically the scene in Europe was dominated by the rise in nationalism that manifested in the French revolution and the sequential Napoleonic wars changing the borders and relations of European powers. The French occupation of several regions in Europe caused Schleiermacher to reconsider where he lived and worked. He moved away from Halle because of the French occupation (ed. Mariña 2005:2). Schleiermacher (1991:28) even sees the need to criticise the French for being frivolous and light-hearted to such an extent that they were incapable, in his opinion, of holy fear and worshiping.

Post-revolutionary Europe underwent a reconfiguration of relations, for example, the relation between state and church and state and education. Capitalism and scientific developments coupled with discoveries of the world and colonisation brought about wealth and poverty, ideological as well as practical advances. Political disruptions impacted emotionally and ideologically on society. In spite of new developments, many theories were a continuation of the already established Enlightenment paradigm. The rise of Romanticism during this period contributed to the way in which Schleiermacher constructed his ideas. It is within this environment that ideas on religion were developed and scrutinised by Schleiermacher.

## Prevailing thoughts on religion

The prevailing thoughts and conception of religion during Schleiermacher's time were determined by the influence of the Enlightenment.

Van der Leest (2020:17) indicated that in the midst of the Enlightenment, it was the Romantics who identified the lacuna in the 'mechanical, utilitarian and individualistic enlightened world'. Under the Enlightenment world view, any and all spark of the divine is removed (Van der Leest 2020:17). The enlightened world view was formed by the thoughts of the likes of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant. The foundation for all knowledge is the human mind. Prior to Descartes, knowledge was based on the human connection to the world. Humans and reality were created by God. Extreme doubt about this foundation led to the conclusion that the only trustworthy foundation for all knowledge is human thinking (Van der Leest 2020:17).

1. For a comprehensive bibliography of work on Schleiermacher, see Tice (2005:325–336).

Enlightenment thought determined that through rational empiricism, a distinction between fact and fiction was possible. Anything accessible through the senses was considered to be factual and consequently through further rational engagement, completely knowable. The opposite being that if something was inaccessible to the senses, it will be delegated to the realm of personal opinion, as opposed to being scientific and therefore not worthy of public notice and interest. Religion was, therefore, treated differently from faith. Religion could be empirically engaged and was worthy of scientific study, but theology and faith dealt with matters of personal choice and opinion. According to the prevailing Enlightenment thoughts, it is impossible to prove scientifically that God does exist. It is no longer God who gives meaning to the world and human existence. The opposite has, in fact, become true: it is humans who give meaning to the world and if so decided, to God (Van der Leest 2020:17).

It is exactly this human self-referential activity of giving meaning to life that Schleiermacher came to criticise. Human attempts at assigning meaning lead to empty mythology or blatant superstition.

Van der Leest (2020:18) argued that it was the Romantics that, although part of the Enlightenment programme, started speaking out against the anthropocentric way of assigning meaning to reality. Although understanding their subjective existence, Romantics claim that meaning lies in something else that can be experienced exterior to the human consciousness – something divine (Van der Leest 2020:18).

This is the context within which Schleiermacher lived: the Enlightenment thought permeating all ideas and emphasising the human mind at the centre of all existence. Whilst Romantics oppose the Enlightenment, they themselves have continued the rational and subjectivity associated with the Enlightenment by rationally arguing for an expansion of means of human interaction with reality (compare Van der Leest 2020:18). No longer should reality be engaged only through the senses but also through feeling, experience and intuition. What if part of reality is only accessible through intuition and not through the senses? Van der Leest (2020:17) indicated that it is Romanticism that played a significant role in determining the way in which Schleiermacher reacted to his contemporaries. Crouter (2005b:2) emphasised that we should understand Schleiermacher within this context.

Schleiermacher's own critique against the concept of religion held by his contemporaries is expressed very vividly. According to Schleiermacher, religion as practised by his contemporaries has become a matter of convenience. The spiritual void in his time (read absence of God) is filled by people with the wise sayings of intellectuals, musings of poets, humanity and cultural values, art and science (Schleiermacher 1991:18). These human generated forms of meaning are supposed to replace religion and elevate the human spirit. When it comes to matters of religion, people approach matters with suspicion and doubt (Schleiermacher 1991:19). People fill this worldly existence with signs of

wealth and power, driven by lust and longing (Schleiermacher 1991:23), to such an extent that people no longer have the need to think of the eternal (Schleiermacher 1991:19). A new Universum is created, filled with subjectively created things that make this worldly life meaningful and tolerable. But in fact, these things are empty and powerless according to Schleiermacher (1991:23). People have become suspicious of the traditional form of religion and feel comfortable in their own creation. The Enlightenment caused people to become 'numb for religion because of their business with daily life and their engagement in transcendental philosophy' (Van der Leest 2020:19).

For Schleiermacher (1991:21, 37), even the most educated and wisest of his time have transformed religion into a game of opposing powers. On the one hand is the human drive to absorb everything around them, and on the other hand is the longing to expand your own ideas to fill the whole world (Schleiermacher 1991:21). The powers of consumption and self-transcendence constantly drive human thought and behaviour. People accumulate earthly things and because of the excessive focus on material matters, people never realise the true essence of human existence (Schleiermacher 1991:23). The result is according to Schleiermacher (1991:22) that humans avoid being transformed but only want to transform the world around them according to their own needs. People have no true knowledge. Although they theoretically believe that all religions consist of fear of an eternal being and trust in the existence of another world, it still does not have any effect on them (Schleiermacher 1991:31). According to them, religion is empty and false (Schleiermacher 1991:32). Some corrective was necessary.

## Schleiermacher on religion

In the previous section, I have attempted to depict the concept of religion as was perceived in Europe during Schleiermacher's time. It is not always clear when people expressed thoughts on religion whether they were thinking of Christianity only. Schleiermacher discussed the phenomenon of religion. He would specify when he was referring to a particular religion, like Christianity or Judaism (Schleiermacher 1991:161–206). If Schleiermacher expressed critique at and dissatisfaction with the idea of religion held by his contemporaries, what does he then suggest in its place? What does he want to call his contemporaries (Schleiermacher 1991:40)?

As to why Schleiermacher undertook the endeavour of defining religion, Dole (2010:75) pointed out that Schleiermacher did not intend to indicate that all religions are similar, nor to attempt to elevate religion above scientific scrutiny. Much rather the purpose of Schleiermacher's discourse was to indicate how religion can peacefully co-exist as a phenomenon in an environment where scientific advances are rife (Dole 2010:75). It is exactly this aspect that makes the study of religion and the way in which Schleiermacher present the concept of religion relevant for today.

## Superstition and religion: What is religion according to Schleiermacher?

For Schleiermacher (1991:28), the illusion of religion, which he witnessed amongst his contemporaries, is nothing more than superstition and the false fables of cultures (Schleiermacher 1991:33). Even the attempt of presenting Christianity is, according to Schleiermacher, a flawed collage consisting of elements from metaphysics and morality, resulting in what people call 'rational Christianity' (Schleiermacher 1991:33). In all attempts by people to find religion in religious systems, no religion was discovered, as it is not to be found there (Schleiermacher 1991:34). Nobody is honestly searching for the truth (Schleiermacher 1991:35). People have no knowledge. Their religion is empty, dead and worthless. Schleiermacher (1991:29) even dares to call his own time 'barbarous'.

Schleiermacher (1991:24) believed that every now and then God sends mediators who act as translators of his will to people to call them back to true religion. He experiences himself as being such a mediator called by God (Schleiermacher 1991:21, 26) to speak out against the irreligious of his time. The task of the mediators is to teach and educate (Schleiermacher 1991:24). Mediators can be poets, preachers or artists who act as priests to awake those who fell asleep, to nourish the seed within humanity and to encourage the love for the Almighty (Schleiermacher 1991:25). Schleiermacher (1991:36) sees it as his task to call people away from the forms they have considered to be religion. According to Schleiermacher (1991:37), there is no reason for people to value and love the kind of games they have engaged with. He will show them the way to authentic religion. His task as a mediator, Schleiermacher (1991:29) believes, is to guide people to find their way to that which is most valuable so that people can discover the inner secrets of the holy (Schleiermacher 1991:29–30). According to Schleiermacher (1991:34), in all religion, there lies something of the 'spiritual matter'.

According to Schleiermacher (1991:43), metaphysics and morality have entered the understanding of religion and caused confusion as to what religion truly is. According to Schleiermacher (1991:44), metaphysics, or 'philosophy of the transcendental', as he calls it, has resulted in a classification of the universe where different beings are categorised. Morality, on the other hand, created sets of laws and responsibilities enforced on human behaviour (Schleiermacher 1991:44). Based on metaphysics, an idea of an original being is constructed and is depicted as the originator of morality. The high being is the Giver of the Law (Schleiermacher 1991:45). Eventually, religion becomes a collage and construction consisting of metaphysics and morality (Schleiermacher 1991:44). The goal of all religion is then to convert unbelievers to subscribe to this construction (Schleiermacher 1991:48). It is Schleiermacher's intention (Schleiermacher 1991:48) to indicate that religion does not rest on the foundation of metaphysics and morality.

In order to go about arguing a different foundation for religion, Schleiermacher (1991:48) presented an argument in a form he calls 'concentric circles'. The first circle constitutes the essence of religion, the second circle elaborates on religious intuition and feeling whilst the third circle discusses concrete examples of intuition and feeling.

The true foundation of religion according to Schleiermacher (1991:49) lies in experience/intuition and feeling (*Anschauung und Gefühl*). The experience and feeling are directed towards 'das Universum', which Schleiermacher (1991:49) defines as the totality of all existence and events, the world, nature, humanity and history. This universe is to be experienced, gazed upon and felt in its entirety. By experiencing the universe in this way, the infinite is experienced in the finite, the eternal in the now. This is not a focus on human existence but an attempt by the finite to see the infinite (Schleiermacher 1991:49). It is human nature, according to Schleiermacher to long for (a sense and taste for) the infinite ('*Sinn und Geschmack fürs Unendliche*' [Schleiermacher 1991:51]). By longing for the infinite, humanity overcomes superstitious forms of religion which are human-made creations (Schleiermacher 1991:51). This longing is expressed in the intuition of the universe (*Anschauen des Universums*) (Schleiermacher 1991:52). Both intuition and feeling are necessary (Schleiermacher 1991:63).

For Schleiermacher (1991:52), the concept of *Anschauen des Universums* is the best description of how he understands religion. The constitutive moment religion commences is when the one experiencing that which is experienced is influenced. The one experiencing is acting independently and then comprehends the nature of that which is experienced. But what is experienced and observed is not pure nature, but the experience of its influence. This is an ongoing process of continuously becoming aware of the part of the totality which is experienced (Schleiermacher 1991:53). Only the experience of the influence, the impression made, is of importance and constitutes religion. It is not the experience or feeling that is religion, but the inner experience and becoming one with the universe (Schleiermacher 1991:62). The mystical side of Schleiermacher is revealed when he claimed that authentic religion only occurs when the soul experiences the breath of the eternal in everything (Schleiermacher 1991:62).

This mystical becoming one with the infinite is described as (Schleiermacher 1991):

[S]owie sie sich formt, die geliebte in immer gesuchte Gestalt, flieht ihr meine Seele entgegen, ich umfange sie nicht wie einen Schatten, sondern wie das heilige Wesen selbst. Ich liege am Busen der unendlichen Welt: ich bin in diesem Augenblick ihre Seele, den ich fühle alle ihre Kräfte und ihr unendliches Leben wie mein eigenes; sie ist in diesem Augenblick mein Leib, den ich durchdringe ihre Muskeln und ihre Glieder wie meine eigenen. (p. 64)

This moment of experiencing the infinite so intensely is what Schleiermacher (1991:65) referred to as 'the moment of birth of all that exist in religion'. Schleiermacher (1991:65)



reminded his readers that he cannot show the infinite to them, but he can only make present the intuition and feeling. Without feeling and intuition, the result is no religion, only caricature (Schleiermacher 1991:66).

Rudolf Otto, who edited the original 1991 edition of Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion*, made a footnote here that this matter is the key to Schleiermacher's idea of experiencing the eternal (Schleiermacher 1991:64). To experience the infinite is not to have an ecstatic experience nor a vision, but rather the inner experience of the infinite in the finite. The infinite is experienced differently in each individual. This reflects an authentic mystic event for the human spirit, namely to experience the eternal, the divine in finite terms. In this way, Otto (in Schleiermacher 1991:64) explained that one becomes one's own prophet, experiences one's own 'miracle' and one's own revelation.

An investigation and attempt at describing and understanding the nature and substance of that which is experienced becomes what Schleiermacher (1991:53) calls, 'empty mythology'. To express the feeling of being grasped by the infinite results in religion, but the moment the origin of deities is depicted, it resorts to mythology (Schleiermacher 1991:54). To discuss the actions of the deity within the world, depicting the relation to the infinite totality is religion, but inquiries as to the essence of the deity might be important to metaphysics, but these endeavours remain mythology (Schleiermacher 1991:54). This experience of the infinite is continuous, unique and valid for each individual, resulting in many religions (Schleiermacher 1991:55).

This is where religions are similar and equal. Each religion starts where there is an authentic connection made with the infinite. The experience of the infinite is the beginning of religion. No religion can claim the final and single experience of the infinite (Schleiermacher 1991:56). Each experience is only participating in a part of the totality; each religion provides a unique facet and authentic perspective although different (Schleiermacher 1991:57).

This contributes to the tolerance that can be expected from all religions. In everything, all things that are finite stand next to one another, all is one and true (Schleiermacher 1991:58). This tolerance and hospitality (Schleiermacher 1991:57) between religions cause religions to be open and accommodating to what lies beyond their own sight. The greater the taste and yearning for the infinite (*Sinn und Geschmack des Unendlichen*), the more complete the impressions become (Schleiermacher 1991:60). Feeling, however, remains the essence. The moment the experience goes beyond feeling and leads to acts and deeds, how rational and pious it may be, it is nothing else than 'unholy superstition' (Schleiermacher 1991:60). Or when feeling leads to worldly relations, it becomes nothing else than 'enslaving superstition' (Schleiermacher 1991:61).

For Schleiermacher, religion is no longer encapsulated in myths and rituals, knowledge nor morals. Religion is defined

more in a personal, emotional, experiential and spiritual manner (compare Van der Leest 2020:19).

## Interpreting Schleiermacher

As indicated in a previous section, the prevailing ideas on religion during the time of Schleiermacher were permeated by the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher attempted to escape the confinement of rationalism diffused by the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher attempted to redefine the place and nature of religion after the Enlightenment (Van der Leest 2020:18). The result, however, was that Schleiermacher was seen as to oscillate to the exact opposite of rationalism and confine himself in psycho-social confinement of feeling and intuition.

For Schleiermacher as for Kant, the human existence in this world is ambiguous. Kant upholds a strict dualism between the subject and object, sense and thought, thinking and willing. Schleiermacher, however, follows in the line of thought of Spinoza, subscribing to a monistic understanding of reality. There is a unity of feeling of being, thus feeling refers to existence, for Schleiermacher (Frank 2005:27). The feeling is the site where transcendent being is experienced (Frank 2005:28). Thus for Schleiermacher, there is no objective being outside human existence to be experienced by human consciousness. Being causes a feeling of dependence within the human consciousness and the being is located above descriptive truths (metaphysics) and above actions (morals). The transcendent is grounded in the human self-consciousness, thus resulting in a unity (Frank 2005:29). Transcendence is, according to Schleiermacher, the highest concept transcending other concepts (Frank 2005:30). Consciousness is dependent on being (Frank 2005:30).

Schleiermacher provides a basis for religious experience, but not in moral actions (as Kant did) or based on knowledge of an objective entity outside of human consciousness (Schleiermacher 1991:43–47, 2016:7). Knowledge of something is rather a feeling (Frank 2005:30). According to Schleiermacher, the base for the relation to being lies in self-consciousness (Frank 2005:29). Schleiermacher (2016:6) used the terms feeling and self-consciousness as equivalents. This self-reflection is based on Schleiermacher's expansion of Spinoza's concept of monism (Frank 2005:28). This awareness of being lies in human intuition and feeling (self-consciousness), what Schleiermacher refers to as a feeling of *schlechthin abhängig* or 'a feeling of absolute dependence' (Schleiermacher 2016:12).<sup>2</sup>

2. Dole (2014:79) pointed out that it needs to be kept in mind that Schleiermacher wrote *Christian faith* (1830) much later than his first publication of *Über die Religion* (1799). In both, he expresses his philosophy of religion. *Christian Faith* appears to deal only with Christian doctrine. However, in understanding Christian doctrine scientifically, Schleiermacher made it clear that such understanding is dependent on understanding religion in general. Schleiermacher dealt with describing religion in paragraphs 1–31 in *Christian faith*. Although very similar to his description of religion in *Über die Religion*, there are differences. Dole (2014:79–80) discusses two main differences: in *Christian faith*, Schleiermacher used the term piety more. Secondly, in *Christian faith*, Schleiermacher made the important claim, that is absent from *Über die Religion*, that 'all forms of religion, however diverse, are ultimately rooted in a central, definitive element, which he termed a feeling of absolute dependence' (see Schleiermacher 2016:12).

Schleiermacher placing religion, within the sphere of feeling, is based on a Romantic response of avoiding the rationalism trap set by the Enlightenment (Poe 2017:160). Rationalism professes engaging with the predictable, the knowable. Schleiermacher avoids this certainty predicated by modernity by reverting to feeling, rather than knowledge and actions.

Schleiermacher has been accused that his ideas on religion are human-centred and subjective, even accusing him of replacing God with human consciousness (Adams 2005:35). Schleiermacher is accused of anthropocentrism or subjectivism based on his understanding that religion does not go beyond the state of mind of the religious person but focuses on human experience. It is, however, clear that for Schleiermacher, the existence of the transcendence lies implicitly outside of the human consciousness (Adams 2005:39–40). Adams (2005:35) states that there is enough evidence from Schleiermacher's writings that he implicitly refers to a being greater than ourselves.

The human feeling and intuition are directed at something (being) outside human existence. According to Frank (2005:30), Schleiermacher is indeed unclear as to what he means with being. Adams (2005:35) concedes that Schleiermacher's reference to the being much greater than ourselves is indeed difficult to understand.

Schleiermacher's emphasis on the place of feeling is expounded and applied in different disciplines. Dreyer (2014:2) applied feeling to the pastoral care implementing narrativity and feeling as guide in the development of practical theology. Schleiermacher has been identified by several scholars as the father of practical theology (ed. Mariña 2005:1) or practical theology as 'the crown of theology' (Crouter 2005a:123).

For Van der Leest (2020:18), Schleiermacher engages with a spiritual understanding of religion. Religion is not a reciprocal relation between immanent and transcendent but rather 'a spiritual move embodied in the here and now' emphasising that the divine can be discovered 'in and through the finite' (Van der Leest 2020:18). Veldsman (2019:2) stated that the infinite is discovered 'in the midst of the finite'. This implies that Schleiermacher never intended the self-conscious feeling of absolute dependence to be a self-directed awareness, but a feeling directed at something.

What constitutes this something greater? Is it God? For Schleiermacher, God does not stand at the centre of the human relationship with the universe (compare Van der Leest 2020:19). Divinity is merely a type of religious intuition (Schleiermacher 1991:51). Humans can decide whether they want to fill their view of the universe with the presence of god. The perception of god is based on human imagination (Van der Leest 2020:19). Schleiermacher as Reformed theologian does have a very clear idea and understanding of God. Poe (2017:46) emphasises the fact that Schleiermacher perceives God as the creator, implying that God existed prior

to human existence. According to Schleiermacher, God's power as Creator flows over into his redemptive act in and through Jesus (Poe 2017:47). Venter (2019:2) indicates how Schleiermacher discusses the attributes of God in his *Glaubenslehre* to emphasise the human feeling of absolute dependence. The Trinitarian God Schleiermacher presents the acknowledgement of the divine connecting with human nature (cf. Venter 2019:3). This connection leads to the formation of the Christian community.

Life is perceived as the alternation between abiding-in-self (*Insichbleiben*), representing an inward self-reflection, and a passing-beyond-onself (*Aussichheraustreten*), representing an outward self-transcending (Schleiermacher 2016:8). Religion is, therefore, not only an individualistic activity directed to the self. It also implies an outward directed activity towards society and beyond – an outward expression of internalised feelings. This is emphasised by Schleiermacher's understanding of God as the One, who through his being constitutes the Christian community. In this sense, Schleiermacher belied the accusation of subjectivism and anthropocentrism. Religion is located within a social matrix, which Schleiermacher (1991:131) would indicate, for Christianity at least, the community of the church.

## Schleiermacher for today

The question remains whether Schleiermacher is still relevant for today. Have his critics not proved him to be obsolete?

Dole (2010:75–76) identifies three schools of criticism that arose over time against Schleiermacher: (1) a school of thought represented by Hegel, (2) a school of thought represented by Barth and (3) Proudfoot as an exponent of a third school of thought. Poe (2017:8) adds to this list the growing school of critique amongst feminists criticising Schleiermacher for reinforcing sexism amongst Christianity.

According to Dole (2010:75), Hegel and his followers criticised Schleiermacher for stating the subjective over against the objective in religion and feeling over above knowledge. Barth and his followers criticised the anthropocentrism in Schleiermacher's thought (Dole 2010:76). Dole (2010:76) argued that the two schools of thought represented by Hegel and Barth seem to have dissipated. The third school of criticism seems to prevail. According to Proudfoot, the problem with Schleiermacher lies in his insistence that religion is constituted by religious experience (Dole 2010:76). If religion is grounded in feeling and experience, this precedes any conceptualised form of religion. There might be a non-religious explanation to this feeling. This feeling is expressed and manifests in phenomena such as doctrines and rituals (thus actions and deeds) as a result of religious experience and not of cultural impulses. According to Dole (2010:77), this line of argumentation influenced recent developments in the study of religion, such as Russell McCutcheon who states that religion based on feeling makes it something *sui generis* and indeed a private affair.

Criticism on Schleiermacher's understanding of religion has mainly centred around two issues: subjectivism and reductionism. As Dole (2010:75) points out, Schleiermacher 'valorized the subjective in religion'. This resulted in reducing religion to 'a matter of feeling as opposed to knowledge' (Dole 2010:75). By accusing Schleiermacher of being a subjectivist, it is implied that his references to God are merely references to humanity 'in a loud voice' (Poe 2017:5). This critique of Schleiermacher is reflected in the school of thought associated with Barth. In this sense, Schleiermacher is accused of being a mystic focused on the human subject and not taking the revelation of God in Jesus as captured in the Scriptures seriously, but rather relativising the revelation as it occurs in every individual (Poe 2017:6). This line of thought is continued after Barth by Lindbeck (in Poe 2017:7) who accuses Schleiermacher of being interested in doctrines merely as symbols of inner feelings. The result, according to Lindbeck (in Poe 2017:7), is that religions are then presented as various expressions of a common experience of the ultimate.

I think what is common amongst religions is, however, not the ultimate and how it is perceived, but the experience of it, that is, where the communality lies. This, of course, leads to a reductionist understanding of religion as feeling and intuition. The emphasis on the feeling of dependence that Schleiermacher stated, however, directs religious feeling first to an inward experience and then to an outward expression.

In spite of the criticism against Schleiermacher, I believe his ideas on religion are applicable today. Three areas can be identified where Schleiermacher is still relevant for current studies of religion.

## Definition of religion

Schleiermacher's way of arguing that each individual has an experience with the infinite (the infinite in the finite) resulting in an individualised expression of religious experience, with an option to add a deity to one's religious experience, opens up the way in which religion can be defined. Religion is no longer referring to the institutionalised system, but is now personalised and individualised to include the emotional and spiritual connection to the infinite.

By adding the elements of intuition and feeling, a more inclusive and even broadened definition for religion is created. Religion is no longer confined to rational explanations and expressions, or fixed systems transferred uncritically from one generation to the next. Schleiermacher emphasises the 'postmodern posttheism' understanding of religion, as Van Aarde (2019:1) indicates.

Van der Leest (2020:17) indicated how understanding the way in which Schleiermacher reacted during the Romantic period to the understanding of the meaning of religion can assist us today in explicating the meaning of religion. According to Van der Leest (2020:18), Schleiermacher provides an approach to understanding religion from a spiritual perspective. The way in which Waaijman (2002:308)

defines spirituality indicates the difference with religion. According to Waaijman (2002:1), spirituality describes the core human existence, namely the 'relation to the Absolute'. Waaijman (2002:308) resorts to Schneider's definition of spirituality when he indicates that spirituality refers to the 'experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'. Waaijman (2002:8) emphasises the 'experience' element which relates to Schleiermacher's understanding of the nature of religion.

Today, studies on spirituality as a phenomenon outside of mainstream religion is experiencing a revival (Waaijman 2002:1). This is, however, not only within churches but also between churches and even inter-religious (Waaijman 2002:1). This makes the study of ways in which spirituality is expressed more prevalent (compare Ganzevoort 2020:60). Schleiermacher's contribution to the broadening of the understanding of religion to include the spirituality aspect is valuable in this regard.

Rudolf Otto (see Schleiermacher 1991:64) already interpreted Schleiermacher's insistence that the individual becomes one with the infinite as mystic, contributing to the spiritual understanding of religion. The understanding by Schleiermacher opens up the spheres of spirituality and mysticism as dominant forms of religious experience. Schleiermacher's emphasis on feeling, intuition and experience plays an important role in understanding of spirituality. Veldsman (2019:2) saw this as an expansion of ways to express the human longing for the infinite.

For Krech (2010:73), the value and importance of Schleiermacher today lie in Schleiermacher's contention that religions do not come into being through chronological emergence but rather rely on intuition and feeling of dependence which leads to the individualised expression of religious experience. Schleiermacher's theory 'transcended classical evolutionism' (Krech 2010:73) giving a new approach to the study of the history of religion. Schleiermacher influenced not only the way in which the concept religion is defined but also the way in which religion is studied.

## Inter-disciplinarity

Schleiermacher's expansion of what constitutes religion causes one to search on the periphery of traditional definitions for the meaning of religion. It is exactly on the periphery at the intersection with other disciplines that Chidester (2018:6) claims true meaning is discernible. Schleiermacher's theory of religion lies at the intersection of anthropology, sociology, theology and psychology. His insistence on feeling and intuition as constitutive elements of religion brings about a comprehensive understanding of the origin of religion. According to Chidester (2018:6), inter-disciplinarity is not only to reach a richer or thicker understanding<sup>3</sup> because of a

3. Geertz (1973:6-7) provided a helpful discussion on the differences between thick and thin descriptions. Thin descriptions would refer to a description of things taking place and being witnessed. Thick descriptions delve deeper in search of



wider base of interpretation of religion as seen from the perspective of society, culture, politics and economics but also to acknowledge the entanglement of these entities. Chidester (2018:6) suggested that studying religion at the intersection of these domains has a value.

Tice (2005:314) identified areas where possible further studies on Schleiermacher can still be done. Many of these areas include these intersections with other disciplines, such as psychology, hermeneutics, aesthetics, political studies, translation and theology (Tice 2005:314–316).

Different contexts give rise to different religious formations. As Schleiermacher indicates, each individual within his or her own context has a unique experience and connection with the infinite, leading to unique expressions of the feeling experienced. It is, therefore, important to study the changing contexts to understand the different religious expressions. The unique inward feeling and the outward expression of the feeling give rise to multiple expressions of religion.

## Contextualisation

Proudfoot (2010:27) in evaluating the relevance of Schleiermacher for today indicated that neither philosophy of religion nor theology study can take place without the knowledge of religion. The study of Schleiermacher contributes to the way in which religion is studied today.

Under the current paradigm of technocracy, a different environment and context exist leading to different ways in which humans express outwardly the feeling of dependence experienced inwardly.

There appears to exist two ways in which the relation between technology and religion can be perceived. According to Noble (1997:11), society, on the one hand, has an infatuation with technology, seeing it as the triumph of rationality over superstition expressed in religion. Technology, on the other hand, is perceived to be the continuation of the Enlightenment resulting in secularisation. Kong (2001:404) attested to the fact that modernity led to the substitution of religion with rationalism and scientism where technology is integral to modernity. Under this understanding, religion is seen as belonging to the primitive past and technology to the advanced future. Instead of the defeat of religion by technology, Noble (1997:12) indicated how religion and technology collaborate in a search for divinity. Kong (2001:405) described how religions are now using several technological tools (such as chat rooms, mailing lists and websites) in order to fill a social space, causing religion to fill (if not flood) the public domain. In this technological environment, a new meaning of religious community is created (Kong 2001:408).

There is, however, a second way in which technology and religion engage (Noble 1997:11–12). Religion presents

..... interpretation and assigning meaning. Thick descriptions entail reflection on what is witnessed.

technology as evil and portrays it as the signs of the end times, and almost in apocalyptic sense, technology is the harbinger of the end. Religion experiences a resurgence, and at times fundamentalistic (Noble 1997:11), indicating how religion is providing the spirit in what is perceived to be an overly rational technology. In this way, religion and technology become opponents vying for the attention of society. Noble (1997:12) stated that religion and technology are in act not that different. Both evolved together leading to a situation where they co-exist. The enchantment with technology is replicated in the religious adoration of Jesus (Noble 1997:13).

The relation between technology and religion is framed in the debate on science and religion. Kong (2001:410) indicated that the intersection of technology and the sacred has been under researched and is in need of more study.

In a world governed and determined by technology and connectivity, humans still search for meaning. Because of the influence of the 4th Industrial Revolution, people tend to have a misplaced trust in technology, believing that it can solve all problems (Fourie 2020:35). The current context we live in determines that humans have an unhealthy dependence on technology (Ganzevoort 2020:56). Understanding and elaborating on the power and advances technology has led humanity to only contribute to the creation of superstition, the false trust in technology as part of this worldly existence. This leaves humans with the challenge on how to define transcendence (Ganzevoort 2020:57). Schleiermacher's notion of intuition and feeling directs humans at seeking transcendence neither in an abstract metaphysical sphere nor in ethics, but relating to the inner feeling of dependence only possible through intuition and feeling. Humans inherently possess a taste and longing for the infinite, Schleiermacher (1991:51) indicated. Religious expressions, how varied they may be, still remain valid, even more so in a postmodern environment (compare Ganzevoort 2020:60).

Computer technology has brought about new religious expressions and awareness of metaphysics. Religious rituals can be performed in cyberspace, even allowing for virtual participation in avatars. The internet has become the oracle, providing authoritative answers to all those who google it. Even the ritualistic 'signing in' through a secret password and being connected to the realm of invisible greatness create a religious experience of awe and tremor (compare Otto 1932:13, 43). According to Koslowski (2003:813), technocracy has created the notion that immortality is possible through the amalgamation of humans and computers. A new dependency, leading to superstition, is created.

We live in what some scholars refer to as a 'knowledge-based society' (Bates 2015:15) where the emphasis is on a society in need of knowledge and a society with easy access to knowledge. It is neither rational knowledge nor ethics (nor connectivity) that provides meaning. True meaning lies in human intuition



and feeling. It is religion, according to Van der Leest (2020:20), that can provide meaning. It is Schleiermacher who guides our thoughts in seeking meaning in our own time. Religion remains the intuitive feeling of dependence.

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